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RUSKIN AND THE ORTHODOX POLITICAL ECONOMISTS

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John Ruskin (1819–1900) is accorded scant respect by students of economic theory. Though he is taken up briefly in some "Principles" and histories and is mentioned in passing in seminars, it is merely to clear away irrelevancies before getting down to serious business. Students of Ruskin might well be dissatisfied with the vagueness of the professional treatment of this great literary man who spent a large part of his life tilting with the English orthodox political economists of his day. Such treatment is, of course, not surprising; better-informed modern amateurs have been more summarily dismissed. However, a detailed presentation of the case of Ruskin versus the orthodox political economists should enable us to get a more nearly adequate idea of Ruskin's critical position, its significance in economic history and in the history of economic theory.

The first part of this study is an examination of Ruskin's indictment of political economy. The second part is a brief consideration of the methodology of some typical orthodox political economists[1] as a background for an explanation of Ruskin's defection.

I

Ruskin's criticism falls into three closely connected divisions: (1) political economy is scornful of religion and Christian morality; (2) it professes to be a science of human relations, and yet it abstracts from man all human characteristics and leaves only brutish ones; (3) even on its own basis, that of a commercial science, orthodox political economy is a false science.

At the time (1860) when, it is conventional to suppose, Ruskin turned from art to political economy, we find him recording what he considered the irreligion and immorality of economic writers:

"As no laws but those of the Devil are practicable in the world, so no impulses but those of the brute" (says the modern political economist) "are appealable to in the world. Faith, generosity, honesty, zeal, and self-sacrifice are poetical phrases. None of these

[1] Here and elsewhere in this paper the name "orthodox political economists" is used to indicate those nineteenth-century economists variously called "orthodox", "liberal", "classical", "individualist", or "English". According to John Neville Keynes (*Scope and Method of Political Economy*, fourth edition, London: Macmillan and Co., 1930, pp. 11–12), Senior, J. S. Mill, Cairnes, and Bagehot best represent the point of view of that school.

things can, in reality, be counted upon; there is no truth in man which can be used as a moving or productive power."[2]

So he states in *Modern Painters*, and two years later, in a letter to his friend Dr. John Brown, he says:

> The Science of Political Economy *is* a Lie,—wholly and to the very root (as hitherto taught). . . . To this "science," and to this alone (the professed and organized pursuit of Money) is owing *All* the evil of modern days.[3]

In making such comments Ruskin is arguing from a proposition which, if admitted, may warrant the conclusion he draws. And he does not hesitate to state that proposition:

> You have founded an entire Science of Political Economy, on what you have stated to be the constant instinct of man—the desire to defraud his neighbor.[4]

Political economy is a delusion which is, he says, "based on the idea that an advantageous code of social action may be determined irrespectively of the influence of social affections."[5] One of the chief charges is that it arrogates a name which is misleading and immoral.[6] Ruskin states that real political economy consists in the study of "the production, preservation, and distribution, at fittest time and place, of useful or pleasurable things."[7] Since the qualities of usefulness or pleasurableness depend upon human capacity to use and enjoy, political economy "must be a science respecting human capacities and dispositions." But, he continues, "moral considerations have nothing to do with political economy (III. i. 2). Therefore, moral considerations have nothing to do with human capacities and dispositions."[8]

Not only does political economy leave out of account the social affections, but it treats society as an aggregate of individuals motivated by private gain. Since it should mean "citizen's economy"[9] it should pass beyond private gain and include national gain. Current political economy, however, says Ruskin, is mercantile economy, concerned with "establishing the maximum inequality in your own favour." And it assumes that such inequalities are necessarily advantageous. But they cannot be advantageous unless attained rightly and used for the benefit of society.[10] Ruskin, then, considers "political economy" a misnomer when used to designate mercantile economy.

But even on its own basis, that of a mercantile science, orthodox political economy is a false science. Ruskin is particular that his readers should not

[2] *The Works of John Ruskin* (eds. Cook and Wedderburn), London: George Allen, 1903–1912, VII, p. 448.
[3] *Works*, XVII, p. lxxxii.
[4] "Fors Clavigera," *Works*, XXVII, p. 95.
[5] "Unto This Last," *Works*, XVII, p. 25.
[6] "Munera Pulveris," *ibid.*, p. 147.
[7] "Unto This Last," *ibid.*, p. 44.
[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81. Ruskin is here referring to John Stuart Mill's *Principles*.
[9] "A Joy Forever," *Works*, XVI, p. 9.
[10] "Unto This Last," *Works*, XVII, pp. 46-47.

overlook this part of the indictment. When William Smart, Ruskin's disciple and professor of political economy at Glasgow, makes the statement that "Ruskin does not object to Political Economy, so long as it is confessed *Mercantile Economy*," Ruskin says in answer, "While I admit there is such a thing as mercantile economy, distinguished from social, I have always said that neither Mill, Fawcett, nor Bastiat knew the contemptible science they professed to teach."[11]

So we can see that he wishes to emphasize the double nature of the charge, even though his equivocal comment on the professionals is hard to interpret. Does he mean that they did not know how contemptible the science was? Is he saying that they did not know it firsthand and from practical experience? Does he mean that they did not know to what extent practical men applied the rules of orthodox political economy as rules of life? Does he mean that they have stated in an inadequate way the fundamental concepts of the science? Probably the last; but Ruskin, master of the implicative statement, sometimes becomes a victim of it. It is clear, at any rate, that he charges the science with falsity even within its self-imposed boundaries.

More specific charges which do not fit well into the above scheme are (a) that no one has defined the terms it employs, such as "wealth" and "necessaries and conveniences";[12] (b) that orthodox political economy excludes the consideration of intrinsic value:

> . . . the first specialty of the following treatise[13] consists in its giving at the outset, and maintaining as the foundation of all subsequent reasoning, a definition of Intrinsic Value, and Intrinsic Contrary-of-Value; the negative power having been left by former writers entirely out of account, and the positive power left entirely undefined.[14]

(c) that orthodox political economy ignores spending:

> And it is because of this (among many other such errors) that I have fearlessly declared your so-called science of Political Economy to be no science; because, namely, it has omitted the study of exactly the most important branch of the business—the study of *spending*.[15]

There seems to be little doubt that Ruskin is justified in insisting that economic man cannot be isolated from social man. But that as a commercial science the current political economy was entirely false qualified critics doubt. Smart believes that Ruskin would have been more sympathetic with the orthodox political economists if he had understood them.[16] Masterman says that Ruskin and his antagonists cannot disagree since there is no common ground between them.[17]

[11] *Ibid.*, p. lxxxiii.

[12] *Works*, XXXVI, pp. 416 and 418.

[13] "Munera Pulveris."

[14] *Works*, XVII, p. 135.

[15] "The Crown of Wild Olive," *Works*, XVIII, pp. 451–452.

[16] William Smart, *Second Thoughts of an Economist*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1916, p. 4.

[17] F. G. Masterman, "Ruskin the Prophet," *Ruskin the Prophet and Other Centenary Studies* (ed. J. H. Whitehouse), London: George Allen and Unwin, 1920, p. 47.

What is this misunderstanding with which friendly critics of Ruskin credit him? It results from Ruskin's conviction that there can be no science of commercial economy, at least on the lines of the traditional science, because its elementary conceptions are incapable of abstraction. Let us illustrate. Ruskin defines value as that which "avails towards Life." Value is intrinsic, and it will not avail towards life unless the valuable object is in the hands of a person who is able to appreciate true worth, a person endowed with acceptant capacity.[18] In pointing out the difference between this attitude and that of the orthodox economists, it is well to notice the point in the history of economic theory at which intrinsic value and exchange value become definitely dissociated. Adam Smith says:

> The word VALUE, it is to be observed, has two different meanings, and sometimes expresses the utility of some particular object, and sometimes the power of purchasing other goods which the possession of that object conveys. The one may be called 'value in use'; the other 'value in exchange'. The things which have the greatest value in use have frequently little or no value in exchange; and, on the contrary, those which have the greatest value in exchange have frequently little or no value in use. . . . In order to investigate the principles which regulate the exchangeable value of commodities, I shall endeavor to show,
>
> First, what is the real measure of this exchangeable value; or, wherein consists the real price of all commodities.
>
> Secondly, what are the different parts of which this real price is composed or made up.
>
> And, lastly, what are the different circumstances which sometimes raise some or all of these different parts of price above, and sometimes sink them below their natural or ordinary rate. . . .[19]

He then proceeds to his exposition of the labor theory of value and thereafter speaks of real value—the amount of labor expended—and nominal value—the market price. Note, however, that this real value is not value in use, or intrinsic value, but real value in exchange, which Smith is comparing with nominal value in exchange.

Thus it may be observed that Adam Smith, after making the distinction between value in use and value in exchange, drops the former without further comment and begins his analysis of the latter, saying as clearly as he deems it necessary to say—that is, by disregarding it altogether after making his abstraction—that his inquiry purposes to deal only with exchange and not with use, that he has no intention of denying value in use but only of disregarding it in his treatise. And Smith's procedure is justifiable. After all, he never intended that his political economy should be studied apart from its philosophical background. Did he not hold the chair of ethics at Glasgow? Was not political economy merely the branch of ethics with which he was chiefly interested? Had he not written *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which considered the ethical postulates of human behavior? Was he not free to write another which considered only the economic postulates?

[18] "Unto This Last," *Works*, XVII, pp. 84–88.

[19] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (ed. J. E. T. Rogers), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1880, Bk. 1, Chap. 4, pp. 29–30.

Again, Ricardo, after beginning with Smith's distinction between value in use and value in exchange and stating that utility is "absolutely essential" to exchange value, thereafter takes it for granted and leaves it out of account:

> Possessing utility, commodities derive their exchangeable value from two sources: from their scarcity, and from the quantity of labour required to obtain them.[20]

Now this utility which Ricardo takes for granted in a commodity is to Ruskin the same thing as value.[21] But with the elaboration of economic theory "utility" comes to mean economic utility. Witness Jevons' explanation:

> . . . we must not confuse our fundamental idea of utility with *usefulness*, or with any other notion implying moral approbation or reprehension. . . . Even that which is hurtful to a person may by ignorance be desired, purchased, and used; it has then utility.[22]

And most twentieth-century economists are not inclined to bring up in their economic treatises the question of fundamental utility. For instance, Marshall states that "Utility and Want are used as correlative terms, having no ethical or prudential connotations."[23]

So it should be clear that different presuppositions necessitated different definitions of fundamental concepts and forced Ruskin and the orthodox political economists into non-agreement. It might well be that this non-agreement is based upon misunderstanding on Ruskin's part. If so, it is the same sort of misunderstanding which is common among most non-professional present-day critics when they pass judgment upon nineteenth-century political economists. For example, Dean Inge says:

> Ruskin's theory of value began to clash at once with the theory of value which he found generally accepted and almost universally acted upon. To the economist of his day value meant exchange-value.[24]

Since this problem involves the methodological inquiry reserved for the second part of my study, a short comment should suffice here. The orthodox econo-

[20] *The Works of David Ricardo* (ed. J. R. McCulloch), London: John Murray, 1876, p. 7.

[21] Utility, or usefulness, to Ruskin occurs when an object "of an availing nature" is placed "in availing hands"; (*Works*, XVII, 88) thus, since "a truly valuable or availing thing is that which leads to life with its whole strength" (*Ibid.*, 84), usefulness and value are identical to Ruskin. So we might call Ruskin's value "usefulness-value". After defining the senses in which the word "value" may be used—"cost-value", "exchange-value", "use-value", and "esteem-value— Fraser says, ". . . use value is always now known to economists by a special word (as a rule, the word 'utility')—though the reason in this case is not that they are unaware that 'value' may mean usefulness, but that they are too well aware of this, and of the confusions to which it is liable to give rise." (L. M. Fraser, *Economic Thought and Language*, London: A. and C. Black, 1937, p. 60.)

[22] W. S. Jevons, *Principles of Economics*, London: Macmillan & Co., 1905, p. 12.

[23] Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics* (eighth edition), London: Macmillan & Co., 1936, p. 92.

[24] "Ruskin and Plato," *Ruskin the Prophet and Other Centenary Studies*, p. 36.

mists of Ruskin's day did *not* mean that "value meant exchange-value." They meant that value in exchange was the kind of value with which economics dealt.[25] Doubtless the science was too narrow. Doubtless moralists could scarcely convince practical men that they should recognize intrinsic as well as exchange-value, especially when practical men armed themselves with what they understood to be the science of political economy and defied the moralists. Political economy *did* need to add the point of view of social economy as one of its modes of approach. But the assertion that such economists as Senior and Mill were without a sense of values morally higher than exchange-value is demonstrably absurd.

In the passages quoted at the beginning of this paper there is an assumption that political economy and industry fall under a similar indictment. Ruskin asserts, indeed, that political economy is to blame for the evils of current industry. As he says to the manufacturers at Bradford, "And all our hearts have been betrayed by the plausible impiety of the modern political economist."[26] Is there any justification for Ruskin's assertion? Now, there is little evidence that Ruskin read the political economists, none that he read them carefully and with sympathy. There are only the copy of Mill's *Principles* with Ruskin's notes in the margins,[27] and the scattered quotations from economic treatises in his works from 1860 onwards. We have the testimony of his friends Frederick Harrison and William Smart that he did not understand the traditional political economy. But though he may have known little about political economists and their writings, he saw that many industrialists in Parliament and out regulated their conduct by what they considered, or professed to consider, the doctrines of political economy. And he was content with his *post hoc*: he could scarcely have been unaware of the fallacy of his reasoning. On the other hand, he despised an investigation that professed to treat human conduct as a science, and he was convinced that the doctors of the science were either malevolent or stupid.

Ruskin is possibly justified in his attack on political economy. Or, if he did not have justification, he assuredly had excuse for interpreting the statements of its professors in the same way as did industrialists. The moralist was free to use for purposes of attack the interpretation which the business man used for purposes of "good business."

Of course, Ruskin was not the first, nor has he been the last, to blame political economists for the sorry conduct of business and government. Besides English strictures on the dismal science, European economists and social reform writers had made similar charges since the publication of Sismondi's *Nouveaux Principes*

[25] This statement is of course not technically complete. Fraser divides the historic value theories into three groups according to the kind of non-exchange value which in each system modifies exchange-value. In the labor and cost of production theories it is "embodied cost value", in the early marginal utility theories it is "use value", in later marginal and scarcity theories it is "esteem value". (*Economic Thought and Language*, p. 107).

[26] "The Crown of Wild Olive," *Works*, XVIII, p. 455.

[27] *Works*, XXXIV, pp. 708–709.

in 1827. In his treatise on Ruskin there is no doubt that Hobson agrees with Ruskin that political economy is guilty of direct defense and encouragement of industry's reckless disregard of real worth, human and otherwise.[28] In his later comments Hobson alludes to this guilt as a self-evident fact:

> The profiteers and their academic mercenaries were easily able to laugh out of consideration the whims and fads of this literary word painter. . . .[29]

And the last words of Edwin Cannan indict present-day economists on the same score:

> Economists have no right to wash their hands of the matter and say it is not their fault that the mind of the public is an Augean stable. It is their job to cleanse it, and they have had two hundred years to do it in.[30]

According to such opinions the unethical conduct of business has been either motivated or condoned by the science of orthodox political economy and of its present-day successor. Was it the purpose of the political economy of the nineteenth century, then, to give precept to business and government or merely to study existent conditions? The older writers on the subject encompassed both purposes; the later ones attempted to exclude the first purpose and to construct a positive science. However, this question involves the purpose and method of the orthodox political economy of Ruskin's day, which we shall now consider.

II

We have observed Ruskin's indictment of orthodox political economy and have seen that there may have been justification for his critical point of view. But we are not yet ready to pass judgment, for we have heard only the plaintiff. Literary critics in general do not know how sound Ruskin's indictment is, because they apparently are unfamiliar with the postulates and conclusions of orthodox political economy. Also their judgment of Ruskin's economics has been favorable or unfavorable according as they have heard or read favorable or unfavorable professional criticism. But the average economist, even though he may sympathize with Ruskin, bases his judgment on fragmentary knowledge of Ruskin's works. True, the late John A. Hobson, one of the most distinguished of twentieth-century economists, was a student of Ruskin. But Hobson has his own axe to grind and upholds Ruskin's indictment with the more vigor because it is the same as his own indictment. I do not say that Ruskin and Hobson are wrong. I wish only to point out that since Hobson, the only qualified economist who has written at length on Ruskin, is an economic heretic himself, it is advisable to see that the orthodox devils get their due. This is expecially necessary as Hobson and other professional critics take for granted the reader's acquaintance with the orthodox standpoint. The literary investi-

[28] J. A. Hobson, *John Ruskin, Social Reformer*, Boston: Dana Estes, 1898, p. 99 *et passim*.

[29] "Ruskin as a Political Economist," *Ruskin the Prophet and Other Centenary Studies*, p. 98.

[30] "The Need for a Simpler Economics," *Economic Journal*, 43(1933), 369.

gator, however, is ignorant of that standpoint and is therefore inclined to accept the distorted summaries usually given by Ruskin's biographers and other literary commentators.

Every science begins as a body of practical rules and only later permits of theoretical formulation. Political economy is no exception. Therefore, in searching among the English political economists for formal statements of scope and method, we must pass over Smith, Malthus, and Ricardo, and make inquiry of Senior, J. S. Mill, and Cairnes.

Nassau William Senior (1790–1864) opens his *Political Economy* by distinguishing the science as he understands it from the more general science of society contemplated by many of his French and English predecessors. He believes that a clearer, more constructive science will result from "confining the reader's attention to the Nature, Production, and Distribution of Wealth."[31] And wealth he defines as "those things, and those things only, which are transferable, are limited in supply, and are directly or indirectly productive of pleasure or preventive of pain; or, to use an equivalent expression, which are susceptible of exchange . . . or to use a third equivalent expression, which have Value."[32] So it cannot be doubted that Senior makes clear his abstract definition of wealth, however unwise he and his whole tribe may have been in thus restricting the meaning of the term.[33]

Though Senior carefully separates political economy from the surrounding field of social science, he does not minimize the importance of the broader study. On the contrary, he says that the political economist should not allow himself "to wander into the more interesting and more important, but far less definite, fields by which the comparatively narrow path of Political Economy is surrounded."[34] The discussion is largely a terminological one and to the uninitiated seems a futile quibble, especially since nothing but misunderstanding results from it. Orthodox political economists never confine their attention to what they consider the purely scientific aspects of their science. They actually are political philosophers who use economic science as a tool. It is to be regretted, however, that the analytical British mind demanded for so long that the definite theoretical line be drawn between strict political economy and those other subjects which political economists indeed treated, but in so doing always felt that they had to apologize. In the twentieth century the same controversy has continued, but there seems to be more tolerance of diversity of method and content. Though there are still formal dissenters, anything is an economic problem nowadays which economists in the serious pursuit of their investigations feel called upon to treat.

[31] *Political Economy*, London: Griffin and Co., 1850, p. 2. First published in 1836.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[33] "In political economy a word is certainly needed to express the sum of things having exchange value. But it is exceedingly unfortunate, for a science which rests on an analysis of industrial life and cannot afford to neglect the common meaning of common words, that the older economists should have used the word 'wealth' for this purpose." (William Smart, *Studies in Economics*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1895, p. 219.

[34] *Political Economy*, p. 2.

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) begins his essay on method by outlining a science of social economy which "embraces every part of man's nature." He then delimits the science of political economy:

> It is concerned with him solely as a being who desires to possess wealth, and who is capable of judging of the comparative efficacy of means for obtaining that end. It predicts only such of the phenomena of the social state as take place in consequence of the pursuit of wealth.[35]

Having abstracted from reality in pursuance of his scientific method, the economist, says Mill, must not apply his results without reinstating the actual.[36]

Then Mill defines the unit of his science, the much-maligned "economic man." As an abstract science political economy necessarily employs hypothetical concepts. But the actions of this hypothetical man do not even indicate, much less justify, the conduct of actual man.[37] Ruskin has been given deserved credit in the exorcism of this bogey:

> . . . he has, as it seems, most notably of all who have attacked it, overthrown and destroyed that figment of the orthodox imagination, the "economic man."[38]

I do not wish to disparage his work in this respect, but apparently the hypothetical man has been more abused by non-professionals than misused by professionals. Some such concept has been found necessary by all pure economic theorists. Though it is alleged that the "economic man" has disappeared, Hobson believes that he has just changed his name:

> . . . the notion that all qualitative differences can be resolved into quantitative may be regarded as the modern substitute for that economic man moving in the "simple system of natural liberty" by which vested interests defended themselves against dangerous assaults in the earlier era of modern capitalism.[39]

Now, Hobson contests the value of the abstraction involved in marginal theory with far more specialized wisdom than Ruskin employed when he penned his famous image of men without skeletons.[40] Yet the majority of present-day economists believe that there is virtue in marginal utility economics, just as in Ruskin's day economists found justification for production-cost economics. It may be that, as Hobson suggests, the popularity of both systems can be traced partly to their protection of vested interests. It may be, on the other hand, that an abstract commercial science is an essential scientific study. Ruskins and Hobsons may then be invaluable in pointing to new and profitable fields of socio-

[35] *Essays on Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy*, London: J. W. Parker, 1844, pp. 137–138. The essay which concerns us here was published previously in the *Westminster Review*, 26(1836), pp. 1–29.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 140.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 144.

[38] F. J. Stimson, "Ruskin as a Political Economist," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 2(1888), pp. 444–445.

[39] *Free-Thought in the Social Sciences*, New York: Macmillan and Co., 1926, p. 107.

[40] "Unto This Last," *Works*, XVII, p. 26.

logical research; they cannot by so doing discount, in the minds of specialized students, the more abstract inquiry.

Let us return for a moment to Mill. It has been said by many commentators that though in Mill's earlier essay on method he characterizes his science as *a priori* and abstract, when he comes to apply his method in his *Principles* he finds that method impracticable. I find no such contradiction in Mill's theory and practice. He does say that the political economist as such cannot apply his science to actual conditions; but he professes to be more than a political economist. His science is merely an instrument to be used to ascertain the laws of sequence and coexistence in economic phenomena. So he calls his later work *Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy*. In so entitling it and employing in it other than strict economic reasoning, he is not departing from his earlier theoretical platform.

The history of the economic theory developed by the political economists here under consideration presents a succession of sallies into and retreats from the general field of social science. The various generals adopted various tactics in defense of the theoretical citadel: some attempted to strengthen the walls, some to subdue the surrounding country, some to make common cause with the enemy and destroy the fortifications, retaining only the observation towers. Whether or not by making concessions Mill intended to desert his Ricardian fortress, nine years after the publication of Mill's *Principles*, James Elliot Cairnes (1823–1875) felt it necessary to restate orthodox theory in its more abstract form. According to him wealth, an abstract concept consisting only of exchangeable quantities "constitutes the proper and exclusive subject-matter for Political Economy—that alone with which it is primarily and directly concerned."[41] Cairnes is willing to relinquish the name, but not the discrete inquiry:

> Even if it should be thought desirable to give the *name* of Political Economy to the larger inquiry, it would still be necessary to reserve for separate and distinct investigation the laws of the production and distribution of wealth.[42]

Therefore Ruskin's point that orthodox political economy falsely arrogates the name of political economy is granted without argument, and all his impassioned denial is so much fireworks. Perhaps. But the problem is not as simple as that. Ruskin's objection is not merely the fact that the professors of orthodox political economy assume a false name for their highly-restricted study but the fact that their falsely-named economy is understood and applied *as if* it encompassed a complete societal theory. Regardless of what political economy is supposed by scholars to be, Ruskin asserts that it abets mammonism. Cairnes says that political economy abets nothing; it stands neutral among systems and gives no advice.[43] Ruskin ignores the fact that political economy gives no advice,

[41] *The Character and Logical Method of Political Economy*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1888, p. 26. First published in 1857.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

being only too aware that advice is taken by practical men. And Ruskin's position is tenable. To the scientists who formulated the natural laws of political economy those laws were statements of tendencies subject to the qualification *ceteris paribus*. To practical men those laws assumed the aspect either of justice or of inevitability. And we cannot say that the scientists were entirely justified and the practical men entirely benighted. It is impossible to exclude normative implications from positive statements.

Though Cairnes insists on the neutral aspect of his science, it is not that he makes light of its practical application. He is only pointing out that the application is not the science itself but the use of its results. The data furnished by this science

> . . . may indeed go far to determine our judgment, but they do not necessarily, and should not in practice always, do so. For there are few practical problems which do not present other aspects than the purely economical—political, moral, educational, artistic aspects—and these may involve consequences so weighty as to turn the scale against purely economic solutions. On the relative importance of such conflicting considerations Political Economy offers no opinion, pronounces no judgment. . . .[44]

This conception of economics has been retained by the successors of the orthodox political economists. Marshall is speaking of the circumscribed traditional science when he says that economics has been more successful than any other social science because of its greater definiteness and exactness.[45]

Hobson, the most famous critic of the modern classical school, argues against this curtailment of scope which, Marshall believes, makes for scientific precision:

> The notion that, by setting groups of students to work at gathering, testing, measuring and tabulating crude facts . . . valuable truths of wide application will somehow be spontaneously generated, and that by a purely inductive process there will come to light general laws authoritative for social policy, is entirely destitute of foundation. The humblest grubber among "facts" must approach them with some equipment of questions, hypotheses, and methods of classification, all of which imply the acceptance of principles derived from a wider field of thought.[46]

Hobson's ideas have been quoted freely in this study because to understand Hobson's attitude is to understand the attitude of Ruskin. Hobson was what Ruskin would have been, had the latter given his life to the study of economics.

Even a summary treatment of the orthodox political economy of Ruskin's day is incomplete without a consideration of two concepts always associated with that economy: natural law and *laissez-faire*. Of the first Gide says:

> They are simply natural laws like those of the physical order, and are clearly non-moral. They may prove useful or they may be harmful, and men must adapt themselves to them as best they can.[47]

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[44] *Idem.*

[45] *Principles of Economics*, p. 780.

[46] *Work and Wealth* (revised edition), London: Allen and Unwin, 1933, p. 2.

[47] Charles Gide and Charles Rist, *A History of Economic Doctrines*, New York: Heath and Co., p. 354.

Elsewhere he says:

These laws are in no way opposed to man's liberty or to individual effort, the first and sole motive in social evolution. They are, on the contrary, merely the *expression of the relations which arise spontaneously* between men living in society when left to themselves and free to act according to their interests.[48]

Such argument constitutes rational theory, but theory which is inapplicable to irrational society. It is impossible to formulate natural laws without sanctioning their action and thus opposing man's liberty and individual effort. If a thing is "natural," the man in the street considers every modification "unnatural," regardless of fine-spun scientific reasoning. This point needs emphasis in relation to our study. Ruskin accuses orthodox political economists of malicious intent. Such a charge is so palpably ridiculous that it accounts for the bitter or amused opposition to his economic writing. Ruskin may have been unaware of the scientific attitude, as many have said he was. On the other hand, he may have regarded the scientific intent as irrelevant, being aware that orthodox economists were the helpless victims of their theories. If political men had been wise enough to apply orthodox political economy as suggested by the best theorists, all would have been well. But they were not, and their half-wisdom dictated unmodified application of economic theory:

All this time, the attitude of English statesmen was one of indifference. In 1845, the Devon Commission laid bare the fatal defects of the Irish land system and suggested sensible remedies. But no proposals for reform could make headway in face of the prevalent doctrine of *laissez-faire*. Private property was regarded as sacred, and the principles of the classical political economy were invoked in support of a policy of inaction. It was in vain that the economists themselves pointed out the uselessness of maintaining the forms of free contract when the reality was absent.[49]

This brings us to the second concept, *laissez-faire*, about which Gide remarks as follows:

But the Classical school itself thought of *laissez-faire* neither as a dogma nor a scientific axiom. It was treated merely as a practical rule which it was to follow, not in every case, but wherever a better had not been discovered.[50]

That is true. Even Senior, for many years the butt of commentators who speak of *laissez-faire* economists, can be exonerated.[51] After quoting Cairnes' statement that "the maxim of *laissez-faire* has no scientific basis whatever, but is at best a mere handy rule of practice," John Maynard Keynes says:

[48] Charles Gide, *Political Economy*, New York: Heath and Co., p. 18.

[49] Arthur Birnie, *An Economic History of the British Isles*, New York: F. S. Crofts and Co., 1937, p. 266.

[50] *A History of Economic Doctrines*, p. 357.

[51] Redvers Opie, "Senior's Social Economy," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 43(1928–1929), pp. 373–374.

This, for fifty years past, has been the view of all leading economists. . . . Nevertheless the guarded and undogmatic attitude of the best economists has not prevailed against the general opinion that an individualistic *laissez-faire* is both what they ought to teach and what in fact they do teach.[52]

But the difficulty remains despite explanations. It lies in part in the fact that conditions which result from *laissez-faire* approximate, in theory, those hypothetical conditions "which arise spontaneously between men living in society when left to themselves and free to act according to their own interests."[53] That is, *laissez-faire* acquires the aspect of natural law. It is easy to see, then, why *laissez-faire* and nineteenth-century orthodox political economy were confused in the common mind during Ruskin's day and are confused by present historians.

The confusion also results partly from the fact that Adam Smith was looked upon in the nineteenth century as the father of orthodox political economy. Therefore the *Wealth of Nations* (1776)—which contemplates a society so different from that of the succeeding century as to negate Smith's great work for practical purposes in the later period—was applied with disastrous effects in the nineteenth century.[54] This problem would take us too far afield, however.

Let us conclude. In so far as Ruskin's indictment applies to the work of the best exponents of nineteenth-century orthodox political economy, it is false. In so far as his indictment applies to the prostitution of that economy by politicians and industrialists, it is sound. But as to whether the economists were to blame for the misapplication of their theories, we shall have to content ourselves here with a suspension of judgment. The purpose of this study has been only to clarify Ruskin's position in relation to that of his professional contemporaries.

[52] *The End of Laissez-Faire*, London: L. and V. Wolf, 1927, pp. 26–27.

[53] *Supra*, p. 11, note 47.

[54] Cf. Arnold Toynbee, *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution of the Eighteenth Century in England*, New York: Humboldt Publishing Co., 1884, p. 14; and T. E. Cliffe-Leslie, *Essays in Political Economy*, London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1888, pp. 38–39.